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PANEL ON FOLK LITERATURE AND THE OBSCENE: INTRODUCTION

OUR PURPOSE is to examine an area of folklore that has received little recognition up to now—that of traditional erotica—the bawdy, the obscene, the scatological.¹ We all know that it exists, and those of us who have probed for it in the field know that it exists in large quantity and among almost all groups. However, beyond its existence we know rather little about it. We know that it has been collected, but how extensively is difficult to determine, for much of it is filed away in private or university archives and known only to those acquainted with the archives. Discounting highly edited and mutilated material, such as Milburn's, Shay's, and Niles's song collections,² almost nothing has been published. Except for Vance Randolph's remarkable collection of Ozark erotica, amounting to well over 1,500 manuscript pages, and Kenneth Larson's Idaho collection, I know of no instance of anyone's attempting to organize and annotate a large collection of traditional erotica even in manuscript form.

Obviously, the utilization and dissemination of such material is faced with many difficulties: the reticence of most publishers to print it, the vigilant eye of postal authorities in keeping it out of the mail, the even more vigilant eye of the self-appointed overseers of community morals, intent upon seeing that none of it gets into bookshops or upon library shelves. These are merely a few of the most obvious problems.

But I wonder if there are not other difficulties involved in the study and publication of erotic folklore, difficulties that are more directly traceable to us. Do we really understand the subject with which we are dealing? Just how do we define erotic—or obscene—folklore? What do we include in such a category? True, we easily know a bawdy song or tale, but what about off-color jokes; what about erotic classics, like "The French Stenographer," which has achieved wide circulation, although because of its length usually in manuscript form; what about widely known drawings such as the famous Rube Goldberg-like do-it-yourself sex machine for girls; what about graffiti?

Then, too, how do we go about collecting the material? Should we inquire discreetly; should we inquire directly; should we not inquire at all and take what comes, if it comes?

And finally, what criteria should we use in utilizing traditional erotica—of what value is its study to the area of folklore—to the humanities and the social sciences as a whole?

It is hoped that this panel will serve at least as a step in the direction of formulating a rationale for an organized, intelligent study of traditional erotica. Our three speakers deal with the basic issues—definition, collecting, and misconceptions.

NOTES

1. This paper and the three which follow were presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society in Philadelphia, 28 December 1960. Gershon Legman's paper was delivered by Jan Kindler of New York City.

2. George Milburn, *The Hobo's Hornbook* (New York, 1930); Frank Shay, *My Pious Friends and Drunken Companions* (New York, 1927), *More Pious Friends and Drunken Companions* (New York, 1928), and *Drawn from the Wood* (New York, 1929); John Jacob Niles, Douglas Moore, and A. A. Wallgren, *Songs My Mother Never Taught Me* (New York, 1929).

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